

City of Rockville
Historic District Commission
Recommendation of Historic Designation

Re: Eligibility of 50 Monroe Place for designation as a single site Historic District.

Background and Site Description

An application for a permit to demolish the four-story structure located at 50 Monroe Place in Rockville, Maryland prompted a referral to this Commission for consideration of the eligibility of the site for designation as a single site Historic District. The role of this Commission in the historic designation process is advisory only and is limited to determining whether or not to recommend to the Mayor and Council that the site meets the adopted criteria to be so designated.

The facts concerning the site and building are not in dispute. Both the property owner and staff concur that the four-story office building was constructed in 1959 by Otho Barkley Construction Company as 326 East Montgomery Avenue from a design by architect Stanley H. Arthur. Named for its first tenant, IBM, the building is acknowledged to have a stylistic prototype in Walter Gropius' 1925 Bauhaus building in Dessau, Germany and is one of several commercial buildings constructed in Rockville in 1959. It was located within the Mid City Urban Renewal District, but was labeled as a conservation building and not demolished during that project. The fact that it was an Urban Renewal conservation building led to the investigation of the building by City preservation staff as potentially having significance to the City of Rockville, even though less than 50 years of age.

Evidence of Record

A public hearing on the matter was held on September 22, 2005. Staff presented a memo on the National Register criteria for evaluating significance of buildings less than 50 years old, which requires that the subject site be found to have exceptional importance and significance to the locality, state, or nation. Staff gave a presentation on the building and the development changes around it that have occurred since 1959, resulting in the abandonment of East Montgomery Avenue and its subsequent dedication as a public park, the loss of street frontage and parking spaces, and the creation of Monroe Place which offered access to the building via the rear parking lot. Staff's opinion was that the building exterior was largely intact and in original condition, but that the site and frontage had changed, altering the structure's environmental setting and presenting the least significant façade to public view. Staff concluded that the site was of low historical and architectural significance and did not find that it was the site of an exceptional historical event or the work of a master, or a prototypical architectural style. Therefore, staff did not recommend it as meeting the criteria for designation as a single site historic district.

Barbara Sears, Esq. attorney for the owner, Lawrence Guss et al, Ronald Cohen Management Company, concurred with the staff report and recommendation. Ronald Cohen, speaking for the owners, said that the building was not usable in its present condition. He said that the owners had

protested the taking of parking spaces and abandonment of the street frontage during the Mid City Urban Renewal but did not prevail.

Eileen McGuckian, Executive Director of Peerless Rockville and Dr. Teresa Lachin, Program Director of Peerless Rockville presented the history of the building and architect, which were studied as part of Peerless Rockville's Recent Past Survey. Peerless concluded that the four-story office building was the City's most innovative of its time and was an example of Rockville's emergence as a major center of post-WWII development. Ms. McGuckian agreed with staff that the building's environmental setting and orientation have been drastically changed and concurred with staff's recommendation that it is not eligible for designation as a single site. She stated that the Executive Board of Peerless Rockville did not support designation of the building.

After some discussion, the HDC determined that more information was needed on the stylistic precedent of this building in Rockville and the professional achievements and stature of Stanley Arthur. The Commission also requested more information on the Urban Renewal conservation buildings, Rockville's 1950s context, i.e., the stylistic types of buildings present and under construction in the downtown area at that time, and any remaining buildings in the town center built before 1960. The hearing was continued to the October 20 meeting. At the request of the owner, the hearing was further continued to the Commission's November 17 meeting to allow the owner's consultant to testify.

When the public hearing resumed on November 17, 2005, Preservation Planner Judy Christensen noted that the staff had changed its recommendation on the historical and architectural significance of the building from "Low Significance" to "Not Exceptional" to reflect the criterion required for evaluating buildings less than 50 years of age. She said that the building is a late 1950s interpretation of the International Bauhaus style in Rockville and locally innovative in its use of colored exterior panels and window strings on the façade. If the building were more than 50 years old it would have met the architectural and design criteria for historic designation in that it was a stylistic forerunner of mid-20th century architecture in Rockville. In staff's opinion, Stanley Arthur would not be considered a master as compared to Gropius and other modern masters who changed stylistic trends in the 20th century. Arthur was, however, a respected, versatile and prolific architect who could be found significant locally as a designer of schools, institutions and offices that contributed to the County and City's building environment in the mid-Twentieth Century.

Ms Christensen stated that Ed Duffy, who had been involved in the City's Urban Renewal Project, had explained that 50 Monroe was spared during the urban renewal period because it was one of several buildings that were not within the footprint of the new mall and did not require demolition for that project. The building was new and in good condition at the time and did not meet the standards for compensation. She reiterated that although it is the last building to preserve frontage on the former East Montgomery Avenue, the public view has been greatly reduced and the most distinctive features of the building are no longer visible from the public right-of-way.

Commissioner Hitchcock asked if something could be considered exceptional if it was not a prototype and Ms. Christensen replied that it could. Chairman van Balgooy asked if the site met the criteria of possessing high artistic values and Ms. Christensen responded that it was not exceptional in her opinion. Commissioner Hartranft asked if there was anything occurring in Rockville during the 1956-1959 period that would have any effect on what might have been built in one year versus three years later. This question was later addressed by Eileen McGuckian of Peerless Rockville, who stated that nothing occurred during the three years that would provide a chronological marker.

Ms. Sears stated that the owners had contracted with the architectural history and preservation planning consulting firm of EHT Traceries, Inc. to provide more information on the connection with IBM and to provide a more complete survey of 1950s-1960s office buildings in the Washington Metropolitan area, as requested by the HDC at the September meeting. Laura Hughes, a senior Architectural Historian and Director of Research and Preservation at EHT Traceries, Inc. provided photographs and a report and discussed her findings and conclusion that 50 Monroe Place is one of many buildings in Montgomery County that were designed by respected modernist architects. She found that 50 Monroe is not unique in having its structural skin exposed or in its use of porcelain enamel panels. Traceries found numerous other examples of buildings from the era with a similar appearance. This style was embraced by corporate America in the 1950s and it became a common new face for commercial buildings.

On Stanley Arthur, Ms. Hughes said that he was one of many prolific and respected architects of the time, along with Chloethiel Woodard Smith and others. Traceries found that Stanley Arthur had worked in Louisville and Cleveland before coming to the Washington DC metropolitan area. He had designed a variety of building types, including bus terminals that used the porcelain enamel panel design element.

Traceries also found that 50 Monroe Place was a speculative building and that it was leased by IBM just prior to construction completion. The current facility in Gaithersburg eventually became the company's metropolitan area headquarters. Prior to completion of the Gaithersburg headquarters, IBM housed its employees in numerous Montgomery County locations. Ms. Hughes compared 50 Monroe Place to the current effort to designate the 1966 Martin Luther King Library in DC designed by Mies van der Rohe in meeting the test of exceptional significance. She felt that the library met the test as being the only example of a master architect in D.C., whereas 50 Monroe Place did not.

In response to Commissioner Moloney's question on which of Stanley Arthur's buildings were most representative of his work, Ms. Hughes said that his school designs probably were most representative because they showed some of his design innovation. Chairman van Balgooy asked if all of Traceries' survey examples have porcelain enamel panels and glass curtain walls and whether that combination was common. Ms. Hughes responded that all of the examples had the glass curtain walls, but not all combined glass with porcelain enamel panels. She said that there are examples showing use of porcelain enamel panels from 1952-53 and several from 1956. The Commission later observed that none of the examples were in Rockville prior to 1959. Chairman van Balgooy asked why Traceries had used the rear of the building in their

photographs. Ms. Hughes answered that the photos accurately indicate that the most important features of the building are not readily visible from public view.

Ms. Sears concluded the property owner's presentation by supporting the staff recommendation that the building not be recommended for historic designation, as it does not meet the criteria of exceptional significance.

Eileen McGuckian, Executive Director of Peerless Rockville, provided a more detailed context illustrated with period photographs of Rockville in the 1950s. She said that the 1950s was a decade of rebuilding. The economy was good and there was energy coming back to the home front, citing the interstate highways system and other major post-war projects. The federal government was expanding and veterans were returning home, creating a need for more houses, schools and services. Rockville's population increased by 238% during the 1950s and the land area increased through annexation. This expansion and subsequent needs precipitated a change in Rockville's local government as well. The construction of I-270 attracted federal agencies, such as NIST and other research and industrial uses to the I-270 corridor. The City's commercial area, which encompassed the location of 50 Monroe Place, was concentrated on Commerce Lane and Montgomery Avenue. This area was a mixture of Victorian houses, smaller buildings, reused barns and some 1920-1940s commercial buildings. During the 1950s, there were still several family-owned stores with residential apartments above them, eateries for the increasing number of lunchtime patrons, and several car dealerships. Modern shopping centers appeared in the late 1950s and 1960s. These shopping centers took away from retail establishments in the downtown area and urban renewal soon followed. Ms. McGuckian addressed Commissioner Hartranft's earlier question about significant events that may have occurred between the mid- and late 1950s that might have influenced architecture. She said that there was really nothing unusual during that time period that set things apart, but rather that the entire decade was a period of strong growth and expansion.

Dr. Teresa Lachin of Peerless Rockville agreed with earlier statements that Mr. Arthur was a prolific and versatile architect. His work in Rockville was during the 1959-1971 time period. Dr. Lachin showed other examples of Stanley Arthur's buildings, including the Bethesda Medical Building (1955) that has a similar scale to 50 Monroe and the Vaughn Building in Bethesda (1956) that has similar yellow porcelain enamel panels. Of his work in Rockville, Dr. Lachin stated that 50 Monroe Street was Mr. Arthur's most architecturally daring building and it was the largest office building in Rockville at the time. He also designed the Rockville Civic Auditorium in 1960, the 1964 campus-style facility for the Unitarian Church and the 1969 Maryvale Elementary School as well as Wootton High School in 1970. In 1971, he was the architect for the Rockville Regional Library. He retired in 1978.

Chairman van Balgooy opined that the election of 1954 transformed the City and that there was, in fact, a significant difference shown between 1949 Rockville and 1959 Rockville. He added that there were several large buildings constructed in Rockville in 1959, along with the IBM Building, and that the 1950s did appear to present a watershed time period for the City.

Dr. Lachin agreed that the construction of the IBM Building did signal the connection of Rockville to a larger and more sophisticated world. The City had a newfound connection to the

international world through its IBM corporate connection. In that same year, the courthouse got a new wing and it was a banner year for commercial architecture. The Georgian Revival building at 22 West Jefferson, the Abbey Building on North Perry Street, and the Brown Building were all built in 1959. The IBM Building was the most sophisticated of all the buildings that were built that year.

Commissioner Moloney asked Dr. Lachin for her opinion about which of Stanley Arthur's works were his best examples. She replied that Maryvale Elementary School, the Rockville Library for its complex siting, and the Bethesda Medical Building were his best works in Montgomery County in her opinion.

Barbara Sears stated that she hoped the HDC would agree with the staff and Tracerics conclusions that the building is not of exceptional significance and importance to Rockville.

In addition to the above testimony a number of exhibits were entered into the public record, including, but not limited to various planning staff reports dated September 9, 2005, September 12, 2005, October 17, 2005, and November 9, 2005; Maryland Historic Trust (MHT) Form on 50 Monroe Place (Revision #1 and #2); U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties That Have Achieved Significance Within the Past Fifty Years; and a report and images from EHT Tracerics, Inc. titled "Context Study for The Barkley Building- 50 Monroe Place, Rockville, Maryland."

Chairman van Balgooy closed the public testimony portion of the meeting.

Discussion and Motion

The commissioners engaged in an extensive discussion of the issues and the record before them. Notwithstanding the contrary opinions of City staff, Peerless Rockville, and the property owner and EHT Tracerics, Inc., the commissioners expressed their respective opinions that the site is of exceptional local significance in one or more of the evaluated categories. On a motion made by Commissioner Hartranft and seconded by Commissioner Hitchcock, the Commission voted 5-0 to find the building at 50 Monroe Place eligible for single site designation, finding it of exceptional importance to the history and architecture of Rockville, and voting to recommend it to the Mayor and Council as eligible for historic designation. The Commission further directed that staff draft, for the Commission's approval, a written recommendation setting forth the findings and conclusions of the Commission supporting its recommendation. Those findings and conclusions are set forth below.

Findings and Conclusions

The Commission has considered the testimony and evidence placed in the record and disagrees with the opinions and conclusions drawn by City preservation staff, Peerless Rockville, the property owner, and EHT Tracerics. The Commission has determined that under the applicable National Register Criteria for Evaluation Guidelines prepared by the National Park Service, a site can be found to be exceptionally significant or important locally, even if not exceptional on a national level.

The Commission has also determined that it is appropriate to evaluate the “exceptional” criteria in terms of “first, last, best, or only,” and finds that 50 Monroe Place satisfies this criteria in several respects.

The Commission finds, based on the revised MHT Forms and testimony of Ms. McGuckian and Dr. Lachin, that the structure at 50 Monroe Place was the largest office building constructed in Rockville up to 1959 and, as the first home of IBM in the area, it was the first evidence of interest in a Rockville location for large national and international corporations at that time. It was Rockville’s first modernist office building and was widely recognized for its commercial significance and Bauhaus-inspired design. It signaled Rockville’s emergence as a major center of post-war development, research, and technology and its entry into the larger Washington, DC metropolitan area. It is the only structure left of its age, type and quality reflecting this period of Rockville’s transformation from a traditional rural County Seat to an urban city that reflected international style.

The Commission further finds that the building is exceptional in design in its unusual use of porcelain panels and glass curtain wall on three sides. From the photos and research provided by Traceries, it appears that this unusual design distinguishes it from most structures of this architectural style at this period in the metropolitan area that had only the front façade glazed with panels and glass. With its bold geometry, innovative use of vibrant color, and subtle mathematical harmonies, it was the most sophisticated and daring building of the five new office buildings constructed in Rockville in 1959, exhibiting an international style and attracting a forward-looking, high technology international firm, the IBM Corporation. It was designed by a significant local architect, Stanley Arthur. Based on the information provided by EHT Traceries, the Commission concluded that there does not appear to be a better example of International Bauhaus-inspired architecture in Rockville, if not in Montgomery County. It cited from the MHT Form prepared by Dr. Lachin: “Dwarfed by more recent hi-rise construction, it remains an icon of Rockville’s evolving architectural landscape.”

As for its integrity, the Commission finds the building to be substantially unaltered. The windows have been removed but stored. Although the original site and setting has changed as a result of urban renewal, the public has a view of the front and most significant façade of the building via James Monroe Park, which is the last remnant of East Montgomery Avenue. The structure remains the last building with frontage on what was historic East Montgomery Avenue.

Based on the foregoing, the Commission concludes that 50 Monroe Place meets the National Register for Historic Places Criteria for Evaluation A, C, and D (g) for designation as a local single site historic district:

Criterion A: Associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history:

1. Largest office building constructed in Rockville up to 1959.
2. First home of IBM, a major federal contractor, in the area.
3. First evidence of interest in a Rockville location for large national and international corporations at that time.
4. Rockville’s first office building in the “modern” style, an international Bauhaus style.

5. Signaled Rockville's emergence as a major center of post-war development, research, and technology and its entry into the larger Washington, DC metropolitan area.
6. Only structure left of its age, type and quality reflecting this period of Rockville's transformation from a traditional rural County Seat to an urban city.
7. Last building with frontage on the preserved remnant (James Monroe Park) of historic East Montgomery Avenue.

Criterion C: embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction, are the work of a master, possesses high artistic values, or represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

1. Exceptional in design in its unusual use of porcelain panels and glass curtain wall on three sides rather than just the front facade
2. First and best example of International Bauhaus style architecture in Rockville
3. Most sophisticated and daring building of the five new office buildings constructed in Rockville in 1959
4. Designed by a significant local architect, Stanley Arthur

Criterion D: That have yielded or may be likely to yield, information important in history or prehistory. **(g.)** A property achieving significance within the past 50 years if it is of exceptional importance.

1. For the findings stated above, the Commission found the structure to be of exceptional local importance.

Integrity: The Commission found the building to be substantially unaltered on the exterior and the public view of the most significant façade, the front façade, preserved in the view from Monroe Street through James Monroe Park, the last remnant of historic East Montgomery Avenue.

For the foregoing reasons, the Commission recommends 50 Monroe Place as eligible for designation as a single-site Historic District.